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The Impact of Welsh Government Policy on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship in Higher Education (0021)

Introduction

The responsibility of higher education to engage with sustainable development is one of the drivers of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The Welsh Government endorses sustainable development at the core of all its activities. As a result, strategies and policies emerging from the Welsh Government prioritise sustainable development for all organisations and people across Wales.

Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) aim to drive for effective Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC), in doing so fulfilling an important role for higher education (Orr, 1994; Tilbury, 2004; Gough and Scott, 2007). Government policies and their effective implementation can perform an important role in advancing sustainable actions, and the Welsh Government provides clear evidence of achievements for the ESDGC agenda.

The Welsh Government's ESDGC Agenda

The Welsh Government has targeted education in striving for sustainable development. The publication of *Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) – A Strategy for Action* (2006), along with its updates (2008 and 2009) provide the education sector with structure. Figure 1 illustrates

developments for the sustainability agenda to emerge from the Welsh Government. Alongside the publication of *ESDGC – Strategy for Action* (2006), an ESDGC Champion was appointed to drive the agenda within all education sectors.



Figure 1. Important developments for Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) in Wales (adapted from Diniz and Glover, 2010, p. 65).

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) supports ESDGC actions in Wales and convenes an ESDGC Group, bringing together representatives from Welsh universities, the Higher Education Funding Body for Wales (HEFCW), the Welsh Government and other interested parties. The group is maintaining momentum in driving the ESDGC agenda: co-ordinating a curricula audit of ESDGC content,

organising conferences and the sharing of good practice in ESDGC, supporting the successful UNESCO application for a Regional Centre of Expertise and promoting a common understanding and development of ESDGC for the higher education sector (The Higher Education Academy, 2010).

Research Methodology

This research recognises that strategic planning in higher education provides the direction of travel for institutions and also reflects Government priorities. Gaps in the appraisal of the mechanism for corporate planning and incorporating sustainable development into HE mission statements, strategic plans and policies exist (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, 2009, p. 17). Strategic plans are a means to implement change, and by examining such plans for all Welsh HEIs it is suggested the impact of government policies can be identified and consequently help shape a higher education sector exhibiting effective ESDGC. To determine the key areas of focus, three years of strategic plans from Welsh HEIs are analysed to identify common themes across institutions and over time.

Key Findings

The following provides comment regarding analysis of strategic plans from Welsh HEIs from 2007 to 2009. All strategic plans recognise the importance of developing and supporting staff members. However, different goals are cited. Some prioritise recruiting staff with high calibre research profiles or the ability to speak Welsh, whereas others emphasise an intention to improve staff participation in sport and volunteering activities. These differences are more evident in recent plans, reflecting increasing awareness of well-being, and although the proportion of staff with

doctorates is viewed as an indicator of esteem, information regarding improved staff well-being is gaining momentum.

The precedence for 'active citizenship' also manifests itself across the student body. Cardiff University comments that its forty student-run community projects contribute £1 million to the economy and annually 81,000 volunteer hours are accomplished (Cardiff University, 2009, p. 19). Swansea Metropolitan University (SMU) provides evidence of engagement with the community. 'A number of SMU staff and Governors serve the community in an individual capacity (with SMU's full support) as local councillors, members of Health Trusts, JPs, school and FE governors and as active participants in local charitable, social, sporting and voluntary organisations' (Swansea Metropolitan University, 2009, p. 16).

These examples provide evidence of institutions striving to fulfil the Welsh Government's priority to improve social well-being. This is perhaps not surprising considering the funding for Welsh HEIs which originates from the public purse (£356 million for 2010/11). Consequently, it is imperative that policies from the Welsh Government are responded to efficiently. In an effort to determine response times of institutions, all Welsh Government strategies and policies mentioned in strategic plans are examined. Of particular interest is the *ESDGC – Strategy for Action* (2006).

Four of the eleven Welsh HEIs (Lampeter and Carmarthen have since merged) cite the *ESDGC – Strategy for Action* (2006) in their 2007 strategic plans, with five including it in 2008, and three citing it in 2009. However, several institutions refer to the document over the years and five institutions make no direct reference to this ESDGC strategy. This provides an indication of a response time, for some, of one to two years, but lack of reference by several may cause the Welsh Government concern regarding the note taken by HEIs of requirements at the planning stage.

Reasons for speed of adherence to strategies and policies are of relevance across many sectors, thus warranting further research in this area.

Strong leadership and effective management play a major role in successful development and implementation of strategies and policies, and this has been particularly identified as a requirement for successful ESDGC delivery (Dawe et al., 2005, p. 85; Welsh Assembly Government, 2006, p. 33). However, only Aberystwyth University focus on the integral role of ESDGC within their planning, within their Strategic Plan, aiming to identify best practices and monitor activities (Aberystwyth University, 2009, p. 36). Others have argued that without alignment strategic plans and operational activities can lead to 'tick-boxing' of ESDGC policy indicators, rather than meaningful initiatives to deliver sustainable actions and behaviours (D'Cruz et al, 2010).

Conclusions

The future of ESDGC across Welsh HEIs is gaining momentum as requirements from the Welsh Government drive the agenda from 'top down'. However, this must be accompanied with a push from 'bottom up' if there is to be sustained activity and measurable progress. This research provides evidence of the impact of policy using the network of HEIs across Wales, as an accessible group, to achieve effective developments utilising a collective and collaborative approach. Interestingly, despite the imperatives of the Welsh Government, many Welsh HEIs have fallen behind in the 'People and Planet' Green League table for 2011. Perhaps this will lead to significant revisions of policy and its implementation in HEI strategic plans to deliver the desired benefits of ESDGC in Wales.

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